DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 517 IR 017 670

AUTHOR Smith, Mary Ruth
TITLE Using Art Criticism To Examine Meaning in Today's Visual Imagery.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 11p.; In: Eyes on the Future: Converging Images, Ideas, and Instruction. Selected Readings from the Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association (27th, Chicago, IL, October 18-22, 1995); see IR 017 629.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advertising; *Art Criticism; Audience Response; *Commercial Art; *Content Analysis; *Critical Viewing; Design; Illustrations; Learning Theories; Visual Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Visual Imagery

ABSTRACT

A method of pedagogical art criticism can be used to examine meaning in one of today's most pervasive forms of visual imagery: the advertising image. It was necessary for the art critical method to accommodate the following components of advertising imagery: (1) history; (2) purpose in a capitalist society; (3) function in society; (4) effects on society and consumers; (5) form (elements of layout design, visual tools); (6) content (picture/illustration and text); (7) strategy and message (psychological appeals, emotional and basic needs, perceptual devices, audience targeting) and (8) gestalt. In selecting and/or developing the critical method it was important to consider developmental and learning skills gleaned from teaching and learning theory. Six pedagogical methods of art criticism were examined and analyzed for the potential to serve as part of the final framework. A model of art criticism for examining the advertising image was developed which included the following stages: receptiveness; reaction; description; formal analysis; characterization; interpretation; synthesis; and contextual information. This method of art criticism allows viewers to cognitively combine both intuitive perception and intellectual analysis. (Contains 10 references.) (AEF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 391 517

Using Art Criticism To Examine Meaning In Today's Visual Imagery

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Mary Ruth Smith

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Alice D. Walker
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Introduction

The **objective** of this paper is to show how a method of pedagogical art criticism can be used to examine the meaning in one of today's most pervasive forms of visual imagery: the advertising image.

The simplest **definition of art criticism**, as suggested by Feldman (1973), states that art criticism is "more or less informed organized, talk about art" (p. 50). As informed discourse about art, art criticism can be considered as an educational procedure which results in skills for reaching aesthetic, psychological, sociological, symbolic, personal, and cultural meanings in art. Thus, it becomes imperative for formalized talk about art to include perceptual skills in gathering and distinguishing visual facts (Feldman, 1973) as well as the conceptual skills of ordering, sequencing, and differentiating information (Hamblen, 1986) in order to more fully understand and/or appreciate visual imagery of all kinds.

Synthesis Of The Foundations Of Advertising

A synthesis of advertising revealed the essential content base of advertising which shaped the critical model. The central questions concerned the reasons for advertising and, at the same time, the strategies that advertisers put into practice to accomplish their end: the selling of products and services which advertising has convinced consumers they want and need.

In view of the nature of advertising imagery, it was important for the art critical method to be one that accommodated the following components of advertising imagery: 1) its history, 2) its purpose in a capitalist society, 3) its function in society, 4) its effects on society and consumers, 5) its form (elements of layout design, principles of layout design, visual tools), 6) its content (picture/illustration and text), 7) its strategy and message (psychological appeals, emotional needs, basic needs, perceptual

IR017670

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

devices, audience targeting), and its gestalt.

In addition it was necessary for the critical structure to provide for the inclusion of several specific characteristics that are inherent in the form and content of advertising. First, advertising is designed to elicit a heightened emotional response that affects the viewer either overtly or subliminally. Second, advertising is loaded with a variety of contextual information (historical, cultural, social, economic, aesthetic, and psychological) which affects the form and content of the image as well as the viewer's response to it.

Teaching And Learning Models That Impart Thinking Skills

Psychologists and learning theorists have made many attempts to describe the intellectual development of individuals from birth to adulthood. Knowing about these theories in cognitive development, whether based in human development, perception, or learning, was relevant in order to discern the important thinking considerations necessary in selecting the stages for a model to examine advertising imagery.

Human development, perceptual models and theories of learning as espoused by Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Benjamin Bloom, David Henry Feldman, Jerome Bruner, Rudolf Arnheim, and Howard Gardner were assessed in relation to critical thinking skills in an educational context.

A synopsis of the selected theories of human development and learning indicated that the process of learning is hierarchical and that the components of any critical framework should be hierarchical in its approach to content. All models showed that human development proceeds from the general to the specific, from simple to complex, from concrete to abstract, and from the subjective to the objective, and in some cases, back to subjective/evaluative, but based on established criteria.

In selecting and/or developing the critical method, it was important to consider other developmental and learning skills gleaned from the information discovered in teaching and learning theory. The following list identifies several important concerns:

1. Knowledge is a building process. Therefore, incoming information should be related to previously acquired information.
2. Particularly at the more advanced stages of learning,, individuals learn through interactions with their peers. Therefore, it was necessary to include such activities as direct instruction, modeling, and adult paradigms in planning activities.
3. Some knowledge is culture specific, i.e., individuals are confronted by dominant forces which affect them on many levels. Therefore, it was important to provide ways for identifying and understanding such influences so that informed decisions about choices in life and in society could be made.
4. The most effective learning takes place when learning

activities proceed from memory-based recall to abstract ways of deciphering information and then using the new information to fit various other situations. For such instances, it was necessary to sequence learning activities that begin with knowledge acquisition and proceed through succeeding stages akin to comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

5. Retention and application rely on activities that utilize content which personally affects individual concerns. In other words, learning needed to be made relevant.

6. Sequential learning experiences that provide readiness, arouse interest, and promote intuitive responses aid in grasping the overall meaning of a subject through the relation of parts to the whole experience.

7. Intuitive thinking is an essential part of productive thinking in both academic disciplines and in everyday life. The use of guessing-type games could be used to stimulate intuitive thinking.

8. Learning general information first provides anchoring points for specifics. This was especially important for activities that relied on inductive reasoning for the discovery of information.

9. Bring closure to a learning experience is important for comprehension. This could be accomplished through seeking new information or rearranging old information.

10. The three systems of making, perceiving, and feeling share an independent existence at birth. As one develops and matures, these three discrete systems gradually influence each other, culminating in an interaction where each system inevitably involves the other ones. Therefore, it would become important to devise tasks that confirm these structures. This can be accomplished through pedagogical intervention, questioning strategies, and purposeful qualities that guide the experience.

11. Individuals in a classroom setting are more likely to reflect different learning styles and levels of developmental abilities. Thus, it would become necessary to structure learning activities so all participants benefit from the learning experience.

12. Knowledge acquisition can proceed from intuitive to symbolic, notional, and formal. Learning experiences could be planned that involve a) creating and perceiving, b) reading and describing, and c) judging and valuing.

13. Thought and feeling are part of intellectual and emotional development. Individuals possess behaviors that encompass likes and dislikes, attitudes, values, and beliefs. Therefore, objectives could be devised that attend to a phenomenon, respond to it, value it, to organize, categorize, and select the best from a group of effects, and to characterize by judging and revising.

14. Sometimes, psychomotor behavioral patterns become necessary to finely tune, for example, eye-hand coordination. Therefore, hands-on activities can be utilized to perfect relevant techniques related to specific matter areas.

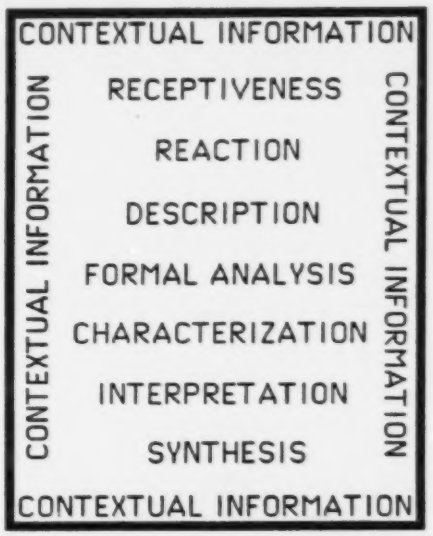
Overview Of Art Criticism Models

It was conceivable that any method of art criticism before reviewing a number of methods could have become the framework for examining the form and content of advertising imagery. However, all the pertinent information needed to fit the basic components of advertising imagery was not found in any one method, but parts were found in several methods.

Pedagogical methods of art criticism were examined in light of previous information gathered through a review of advertising literature. Each method was examined and analyzed for its potential strengths and weaknesses and general potential to serve as part of the final framework. The following is a list of the methods reviewed and the stages that make up each:

1. Edmund B. Feldman's four stages of description, formal analysis, interpretation, and evaluation (Feldman, 1970).
2. Ralph A. Smith's four stages of description, analysis and characterization, interpretation, and evaluation (Smith, 1968).
3. Robert Clements' scientific inductive method which utilizes the three stages of a) observing the significant facts, b) hazarding a hypothesis which accounts for the observed facts, and 3) testing the truth of the hypothesis against new and observable evidence (Clements, 1979).
4. Per Johansen's student-teacher dialogue for aesthetic discerning which involves the three stages of impression, expression, and commitment (Johansen, 1982).
5. Louis Lankford's phenomenological method of the five stages (arranged in sequence, but not mutually exclusive) consists of receptiveness, orienting, bracketing, interpretative analysis, and synthesis (Lankford, 1984).
6. Tom Anderson's contextually funded method composed of the five stages of reaction, perceptual analysis, personal interpretation, contextual examination, and synthesis (Anderson, 1988).

A Model Of Art Criticism For Examining Today's Prominent Visual Imagery: The Advertising Image



The discrete stages are logically arranged to accommodate the various aspects of advertising content previously identified. The stages include the components most often used in the methods reviewed: description, analysis, characterization, interpretation, and synthesis. The other stages of receptiveness, reaction, and

contextual information are borrowed from different methods reviewed because of their fit with research findings. The initial stage of receptiveness is borrowed from Lankford's method while the next stage of reaction is borrowed from Anderson's and Johansen's methods. The provision for contextual information is derived from the methods of Anderson and Smith. Smith provides for the introduction of contextual information early on, whereas Anderson leaves it for later use. Because of the nature of advertising and its pervasive influences, this model allows for contextual information to be introduced at the stage where it is necessary for clarification of the form and content of advertising imagery.

The following section identifies each stage of the model and is discussed along with the essential areas of advertising needed to examine the advertising image.

Stage One: Receptiveness

The initial stage of receptiveness prepares the viewer for the critical activity. It aids in leading viewers from a nonchalant acceptance of advertising to an informed critical awareness of it. Because viewers seem to accept advertising as a part of their normal everyday environment, they tend to overlook its persuasive influence. Therefore, it is necessary to use motivational strategies that allow for openness and receptiveness to the issues involved in advertising.

One way to increase awareness of advertising imagery is by content analysis. For example, one way is to assess the way ads are geared to certain age and cultural groups. Through a content analysis of these ads, viewers can describe what they see, what relationships are established through the interaction of the people, what stereotypes are evident, and what visual techniques have been used to communicate ideas. Viewers can also use the same information gained from the content analysis and compare the differences in the ways they are depicted in ads for different products or even within different magazines.

Stage Two: Reaction

In using an ad for the critical activity, the first question to be asked concerns the viewers' initial responses to the advertising image being assessed for meaning. Reaction is an intuitive and affective response to the advertisement. It is how the image makes the viewer feel, not what the image means, that is important. To elicit responses from the viewers, the following questions can be asked:

a. How do you feel about this ad?

b. What does it remind you of or make you think of?

By expressing their impressions, viewers make commitments about the ad and these commitments serve as bases for further discussion and analysis.

Stage Three: Description

During the stage of description, visual evidence is located and identified. It is during this stage that the viewer can also point out the ad's thematic and formal qualities. The initial

reaction can be used to guide the selection of these qualities. This process should continue until all the necessary visual evidence is determined. If the visual evidence fits the initial responses, then the initial reactions are reinforced. If the visual evidence does not fit the initial responses, then it is necessary to readjust first impressions.

Ultimately, in relation to advertising content and form, description is the noting of components within the ad. For example, the viewers can identify the parts of the advertising copy (headline, underline or overline, body copy, closing, logo, slogan, tagline); the sequencing of the opening, the middle, and the ending; the visual tools (line, shape, color, texture, value, space); technical description; objects or things included in the ad; and the obvious thematic content.

Stage Four: Formal Analysis

The previous stage of description sets the stage for formal analysis. Formal analysis places emphasis on the relationships that exist between the themes, formal qualities, copy parts, and techniques identified during the previous stage of description. It is during this time that viewers are trying to make sense of the overall visual structure of the image (in other words, its gestalt).

During the operation of formal analysis, viewers critically examine the formal relationships that exist within the special qualities of the ad. In searching through the visual evidence in the ad, viewers make note of the relationship between the visual (picture or illustration) and the copy of the ad. Formal analysis allows viewers to note relational qualities not observed during their initial responses to the ad. Since an ad forms a gestalt, it is necessary to look at all parts in relation to each other and to the whole. This is especially needed in uncovering meaning in ads since advertisers embed meaning in image associations.

Stage Five: Characterization

Characterization is the point in the critical activity where viewers try to grasp the style, kind, and type of ad they are evaluating. Characterization is concerned with the intended impact of what is visually portrayed in the ad. The viewer gains access to the style or character of the ad in order to determine its expressive quality.

Advertising techniques that are useful in approaching formal characterization include metaphor, association, idealization, aestheticization, fantasy, signification, and ambiguity. These are ways advertisers control imagery to manipulate consumer needs, values, and behaviors.

Stage Six: Interpretation

Interpretation is the stage where viewers come to terms with meaning in relation to what is expressed in the visual qualities of the ad. According to Anderson (1988), interpretation is the creative explanation of the visual facts, with technical processes, relationships, and viewers' previous experiences all playing a part in establishing meaning. In other words, interpreting the work's meaning is through the visual evidence in relation to

previous experiences. In all cases, it is necessary to reference meanings to the visual properties in the work.

In specifically relating interpretation to print advertising imagery, one can see how advertisers stage ads to serve some purpose and to make an impression on the viewer. Observations can be made about how advertisers use dissimilar things to elicit viewer response and action. Ways advertisers use both overt and subtle imagery to build ads that appeal to the basic needs and values can be addressed.

During this stage it might be important to group the qualities of the image into denotations and connotations. Denotative qualities become those that describe such formal aspects as color, shape, pattern, value, contrast, or space while connotations describe the feelings and emotions of the viewer when he/she interacts with the message of the ad. Denotations are indicators of external reality; connotations become the ideas and associations that are the result of the denotative features of the advertisement.

Stage Seven: Synthesis

Synthesis is the bringing together of all the descriptive, analytical, and interpretative components in conjunction with additional contextual information necessary to form an evaluation of the advertisement. At the same time, synthesis allows resolution of the viewer's initial intuitive/affective responses to the imagery represented in the ad. Evaluation and resolution bring together both personal and expert opinions to determine why advertising does what it does in the way it does it. During the stage of synthesis, determining if advertising really works, how it works, and why it works can be discussed. It is also possible during synthesis to use the ways advertising evaluates itself in order to discover the manipulative powers of advertising. Some questions that might be asked during synthesis include:

1. How have your feelings changed as the result of learning about the ad and advertising through a discussion of the formal and contextual factors that influence the ad and advertising?
2. What is significant about the ad for you? Why?
3. What is the ad's driving, persuasive quality? Why?
4. Does the ad do what it is intended to do? How and why?
5. Is the ad a good ad? Why? Is there oneness of content and form? How is the ad's ambiance expressed?
6. In what ways has the ad used manipulative techniques?
7. How do you feel about the way the ad is designed to manipulate you to buy the advertised product?

During synthesis, one can also look at the ways advertisers evaluate their ads. For example, the following four questions can be asked that relate to the AIDA formula:

1. How does the ad capture **attention**?
2. How does the ad arouse and keep your **interest**?
3. How does the ad suggest you reach a **decision and desire** for the product?
4. How does the ad get you to **act** on the message and buy the

product or service? In other words, how has consumer behavior been affected?

In order to finally evaluate the ad's truthfulness, the following questions may be helpful:

1. What kind of information has been presented in the ad? Is it credible?
2. What is the subject of the ad? How has it been presented?
3. What persuasion techniques have been used? How have they been portrayed?
4. Is the ad appealing to reason (intellect) or emotion? How?
5. Can claims be substantiated? How? Where?
6. What has been omitted? How does any omission affect the viewer? the ad?
7. What is the final message of the ad?
8. What does the ad suggest that you do?
9. With such information (as above), would you be influenced to buy the product or order the service? Will you be able to associate a certain idea with the product? Why?
10. Is the overall message more true than false or is it more false than true? Why?

Stage Eight: Contextual Information

Another important stage concerns **contextual information**. When and how should it be introduced? In this model it can be introduced during any phase of the art critical activity when it is needed to clarify external influences (cultural, economical, psychological) that affect the form and content of advertising. Contextual information calls attention to the "non-formal properties" (Eaton, 1988, p. 79) that are not found in the ad itself. In other words, in a societal perspective, it is necessary to understand the context of advertising from multiple viewpoints.

Eaton (1988) referred to Kendall Walton (an analytic philosopher) who addressed contextual examination as related to an art work's intrinsic and extrinsic properties. Information about the art work is just as important as what is portrayed in the art work. With advertising imagery, this is important because many of advertising's intrinsic features are the result of advertising's extrinsic information. Understanding an art work, an ad, goes beyond the "immediate perceptual experience" (Eaton, 1988, p. 89) that the viewer initially encounters.

Further, contextual examination does not separate form and content. Both are considered equally because they influence and affect each other. In forming a gestalt in advertising imagery, both the layout and the message determine the ambiance of the ad -- that specialness that mesmerizes the consuming public who "enjoys ads as an art form" (Leiss et al., 1986, p. 4). At the same time, advertising's overwhelming presence is a factor that needs to be dealt with (Leiss et al., 1986). By learning the extrinsic features of advertising, one will be better able to synthesize all gathered information to understand the power of advertising.

Contextual information about advertising's history, its function in society, its pecuniary function in an economic system, and its effects and influences on society is necessary for gaining an understanding of advertising. Much of this information will need to be introduced by the teacher or person in charge. Specific examples include: 1) ways advertising is developed to reflect specific ideologies or value bases (e.g., claims of lifestyle, affluence, or status, attitudes toward gender roles) and cultural biases and 2) ways advertising (as well as other forms of mass media) performs four basic functions: entertaining, informing, influencing, and making money (Sandman et al., 1972). Further, examples of ads similar in product, format, intended audience, and approximate date can be compared. Ads about the same product gathered to reflect a span of time can be compared through ways advertising techniques have changed, how imagery has changed, and, at the same time, how the function of advertising has remained the same.

Where contextual information is placed in the critical process is dependent on the type, kind, and style of advertising imagery being examined. For example, it may be important to introduce the types of psychological appeals that advertisers use to influence viewers at the stage of formal analysis since this information may be necessary to characterize and interpret the ad's imagery.

Conclusion

Since the primary function of art criticism is to provide a structure to systematically examine art work, then this method of art criticism allows viewers to cognitively combine both intuitive perception and intellectual analysis, two basic interdependent components of the human mind (Arnheim [in Anderson, 1988, p. 36]) in uncovering meaning in advertising. It may even be possible to see a relationship between the stages of art criticism and the steps advertisers use when they develop an ad from the initial introduction to the product to be advertised to the final presentation of the ad in the printed format in some publication geared to a select audience. Critical thinking from either perspective provides rich possibilities in the examination of advertising. The critical process can be compared to sleuthing where one applies investigatory maneuvers to reach the depths of advertising.

Bibliography

Anderson, T. (1988). A structure for pedagogical art criticism. Studies in Art Education, 30(1), 28-38.

Clements, R.D. (1979). The inductive method of teaching visual art criticism. The Journal of Aesthetic Education, 13(3), 67-78.

Eaton, M.M. (1988). Basic issues in aesthetics. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Feldman, E.B. (1973). The teacher as model critic. Journal of Aesthetic Education, 7(1), 50-57.

Feldman, E.B. (1970). Becoming human through art. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Hamblen, K. (1986). Art criticism questioning strategy within the framework of Bloom's Taxonomy. Studies in Art Education, 26(1), 41-50.

Johansen, P. (1982). Teaching aesthetic discerning through dialog. Studies in Art Education, 23(2), 6-13.

Leiss, W., Kline, S. & Jhally, S. (1986). Social communication in advertising. NY: Methuen.

Sandman, P.M., Rubin, D.M. & Sachsman, D.B. (1983). Media: An introductory analysis of American mass communications. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Smith, R.A. (1968). Aesthetic criticism: The method of aesthetic education. Studies in Art Education, 9(3), 12-31.